

One of Ora Russell's favorite poems - which was published in the same year that Ora Russell was born

[Selected for the Carbondale Leader.]

CURFEW MUST NOT RING TO-NIGHT.

[In the time of Cromwell, a young soldier for some offence, was condemned to die, and the time of his death was fixed "at the ringing of Curfew". Naturally such a doom would be fearful and bitter to one in the years of his hope and pride, but to this unhappy youth, death was doubly terrible, since he was soon to have married a beautiful young lady he had long loved. The lady who loved him ardently in return, had used her utmost efforts to avert his fate, pleading with the Judges and even with Cromwell himself, but all in vain. In her despair she tried to bribe the old sexton not to ring the bell, but she found that impossible. The hour drew near for the execution. The preparations were completed. The officers of the law brought forth the prisoner and waited while the sun was setting, for the signal from the distant bell tower. To the wonder of every body it did not ring. Only one human being at that moment knew the reason. The poor girl, half wild with the thought of her lover's peril, had rushed unseen up the winding stairs, and climbed the ladder into the belfry loft and seized the tongue of the bell, the old sexton was in his place prompt to the fatal moment. He threw his weight upon the rope, and the bell, obedient to his practiced hand, reeled and swung to and fro in the tower. But the brave girl kept her hold, and no sound issued from its metallic lips. Again and again the sexton drew the rope, but with desperate strength the young heroine held on. Every movement made her position more fearful; every sway of the bell's huge weight threatened to fling her through the high tower windows; but she would not let go. At last the sexton went away. Old and deaf, he had not noticed that the Curfew gave no peal. The brave girl descended from the belfry, wounded and trembling. She hurried from the church to the place of execution. Cromwell himself was there, and was just sending to demand why the bell was silent.]

Slowly England's sun was setting o'er the hill tops far away,
Filling all the land with beauty at the close of one sad day,
And the last rays kissed the foreheads of a man and maiden fair—
He with footsteps slow and weary, she with sunny floating hair;
He with bowed head, sad and thoughtful, she with lips all cold and white,
Struggled to keep back the murmur—"Curfew must not ring to-night."

"Sexton," Bessie's white lips faltered, pointing to the prison old,
With its turrets tall and gloomy, with its walls dark, damp and cold,
"I've a lover in that prison, doomed this very night to die,
At the ringing of the Curfew, and no earthly help is nigh;
Cromwell will not come till sunset," and her lips grew strangely white
As she breathed the husky whisper, "Curfew must not ring to-night."

"Bessie," calmly spoke the sexton, every word pierced her young heart,
Like the piercing of an arrow, like a deadly poisoned dart,
"Long, long years I've rung the Curfew from that gloomy shadowed tower,
Every evening just at sunset, it has told the twilight hour;
I have done my duty, ever tried to do it just and right.
Now I'm old and still must do it, "Curfew it must ring to-night."

Wild her eyes and pale her features, stern and white her thoughtful brow,
And within her secret bosom, Bessie made a solemn vow.

She had listened while the judges read without a tear or sigh,
"At the ringing of the Curfew, Basil Underwood must die,"

And her breath came fast and faster, and her eyes grew large and bright—

In an undertone she murmured: "Curfew must not ring to-night."

She with quick steps bounded forward, sprung within the old church door,

Left the old man threading slowly paths so soft he'd trod before;

Not one moment paused the maiden, but with eye and cheek aglow,

Mounted up the gloomy tower, where the bell swung to and fro.

And she climbed the dusty ladder on which fell no ray of light,

Up and up—her white lips saying: "Curfew must not ring to-night."

She had reached the topmost ladder, o'er her hung the great dark bell;

Awful is the gloom beneath her, like a pathway down to hell,

Lo, the ponderous tongue is swinging, 'tis the hour of Curfew now,

And the sight has chilled her bosom, stopped her breath, and paled her brow.

Shall she let it ring? No, never! Flash her eyes with sudden light,

And she springs and grasps it firmly, "Curfew shall not ring to-night."

Out she swung, far out, the city seemed a speck of light below,

'Twixt heaven and earth her form suspended, as the bell swung to and fro,

And the sexton at the bell-rope, old and deaf heard not the bell,

But he thought it still was ringing fair young Basil's funeral knell.

Still the maiden clung most firmly, and with trembling lips and white

Said to hush her heart's wild beating: "Curfew shall not ring to-night."

It was o'er, the bell ceased swinging, and the maiden stopped once more

Firmly on the dark old ladder, where for hundred dred years before,

Human foot had not been planted. The brave deed that she had done

Should be told long ages after, as the rays of setting sun

Should illumine the sky with beauty. Aged sires with heads of white,

Long should tell the little children "Curfew did not ring that night."

O'er the distant hills came Cromwell, Bessie sees him, and her brow

Full of hope and full of gladness has no anxious traces now.

At his feet she tells her story, shows her hands all bruised and torn;

And her face so sweet and pleading, yet with sorrow pale and worn,

Touched his heart with sudden pity, lit his eyes with misty lights;

"Go! your lover lives," said Cromwell, "Curfew shall not ring to-night."

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